

Destruction of the old order in king lear act i

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In the first act of King Lear Shakespeare turns the order of world of the play upside down. By the end of the first act virtually every character's station in life has been changed significantly. Lear has given away his power, he has destroyed his family by disowning one daughter and angered another, and he has banished his most trusted advisor.

When the play begins, Lear is King of England. He has long ruled and apparently has done so competently. He holds all power in England.

Although Lear has advisers, notably Kent and Gloucester, it is clear that Lear is in charge and he keeps his own counsel and makes his own decisions. The play opens with his two advisers, the Earls of Kent and Gloucester being surprised that Lear no longer appears to prefer Goneril's husband the Duke of Albany over Regan's husband Duke of Cornwall. " I thought the King had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall" (I. i. 1-2).

Due to his failure to keep his advisers involved in the decision making process, he at times makes rash decisions such as the disowning of Cordelia (I. i. 113-116), the dividing of his kingdom between Goneril and Regan (I. i. 127-138), and the banishing of his best and most loyal advisor Kent (I. i. 173-178). By the end of Act I Lear seems impotent. He is no longer the powerful King of England. He is no longer recognized as King.

Goneril has instructed her servant Oswald to "[p]ut on what weary negligence you please" (I. iii. 12) toward Lear. When the once powerful Lear asks Oswald " Who am I, sir?" (I. iv. 78) the servant insolently replies " My lady's father" (I. iv. 79) enraging Lear that a servant should treat him not as

king, but as the father of the servant's lady. His power, status, and social standing have collapsed.

As a father Lear doesn't fare much better than he did as king. At the play's beginning he is an all-powerful patriarch and expects everyone to completely agree with and cater to his every whim. In many ways he is like a spoiled child. He seeks and demands constant, undivided attention. Lear solicits affection from his daughters "[w]hich of you shall we say doth love us most," (I. i. 51). When the attention is positive and according to his wishes he exhibits an almost childlike happiness.

Although it is evident Goneril and Regan are engaging in hyperbole, Lear is pleased and rewards his two elder daughters with one third of England each. When he asks his favorite daughter Cordelia how much she loves him he is disappointed with her answer and throws a tantrum, "[h]ere I disclaim all my paternal care" (I. i. 113). By the end of the first act Lear's demands have not changed.

When Goneril argues with him and complains about the behavior of his knights, Lear has another fit of anger and runs away from Goneril to Regan as if he were a schoolboy running away from home. He no longer is the proud father of three daughters, but has banished Cordelia, angered and run away from Goneril, and pins his hopes on his middle daughter Regan.

When Act I ends Lear is no longer the center of social attention. When he first appears on stage the stage directions indicate that a flourish is sounded and Lear enters with his three daughters, his two sons-in-law and an

unspecified number of attendants. In the final scene his presence is not announced with a flourish. His daughters and sons-in-law are not present. Lear's only attendants are the banished Kent (disguised as Caius) and Lear's jester known only as " Fool."

Lear is not alone in his foolish behavior toward his children. Gloucester behaves similarly to Lear. He is used to his power and makes rash, unwise decisions. When the play opens Gloucester appears to be somewhat ashamed of his second son, Edmund who is a bastard for he keeps him away from court, " he hath been out nine years, and away he shall again" (I. i. 32-33).

Gloucester's older son Edgar is clearly his favorite. Yet he is quick to believe Edmund when Edmund plots against Gloucester. Edgar clearly mirrors Goneril, as Gloucester is quick to believe the false accusations made by Edmund and force Edgar into hiding. Edgar also mirrors Kent in that he returns in Act II dressed as Poor Tom of Bedlam. As Tom Edgar accompanies his father and helps him just as Kent helps Lear.

Cordelia's status changes greatly in the first act. Initially she was Lear's favorite daughter. She went from a highly sought after bride-to-be with a large dowry to a woman with no dowry who is refused by the Duke Burgundy and accepted, without dowry by the King of France. When she refuses to kowtow to Lear with false praise her status is destroyed. Although she clearly loves her father she is banished and forced to leave England.

By the end of Act I Lear is no longer the proud, powerful King of England. By his own hand he has destroyed his kingdom and his family. Shakespeare has stripped Lear of his armor and has exposed Lear with all of his vulnerabilities and foibles.

By removing the old order in the first act, Shakespeare provides a vehicle for the readers and members of the audience to explore the real nature of the characters behind the facades each character displays in public life when the play begins. Each of the characters will reveal his or her true nature throughout the remainder of the play. These revelations provide the tension and the interest of King Lear.

Works Cited

The Tragedy of King Lear. The Riverside Shakespeare. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1974. 1255-1295.